

Choosing a Methodological Path: Reflections on the Constructivist Turn

Jenna P. Breckenridge, Queen Margaret University, Derek Jones, Northumbria University,
Ian Elliott, Queen Margaret University, Margaret Nicol, Queen Margaret University

Abstract

Researchers deciding to use grounded theory are faced with complex decisions regarding which method or version of grounded theory to use: Classic, straussian, feminist or constructivist grounded theory. Particularly for beginning PhD researchers, this can prove challenging given the complexities of the inherent philosophical debates and the ambiguous and conflicting use of grounded theory 'versions' within popular literature. The aim of this article is to demystify the differences between classic and constructivist grounded theory, presenting a critique of constructivist grounded theory that is rooted in the learning experiences of the first author as she grappled with differing perspectives during her own PhD research.

Introduction

Reflecting on the PhD process, it could be said that the decision to use grounded theory is only a starting point. Often armed with only a limited understanding of 'grounded theory', new PhD researchers are faced with the challenge of navigating their way through the methodological mire in order to arrive at an informed decision about which 'version' of grounded theory to use: Classic (or glaserian) grounded theory, straussian grounded theory, feminist grounded theory or constructivist grounded theory. Cutcliffe (2004) has identified, however, that many researchers appear to have avoided this challenge altogether, opting simply for an ambiguous medley of aspects from each version without regard for their inherent incompatibilities. Ultimately, this 'pick and mix' approach to grounded theory poses a significant challenge for novice researchers as, without being able to refer to useful exemplars of grounded theory studies, it is difficult to understand and prepare for the practicalities of carrying out one's own grounded theory research (Breckenridge & Jones 2009).

By sharing the methodological reasoning developed by the first author during her own PhD study, the aim of this article is to assist novice researchers in understanding the differences between two of the main grounded theory versions: constructivist grounded theory and classic grounded theory. Writing as a classic grounded theorist, the aim of this article is not to discredit constructivist grounded theory, but is instead to illustrate the incompatibilities between versions in order to share learning and emphasise the importance of using classic grounded theory as a full package methodology.

Constructivist grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory was proffered by Charmaz (2003, 2006) as an alternative to classic (Glaser 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2011) and straussian grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998). Charmaz (2003) has advocated that her constructivist version of grounded theory "takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research into the 21st century" (p. 250). Certainly, for the first author choosing between versions, Charmaz's (2003) attempt at 'modernising' (or, indeed, 'post-modernising')

grounded theory had immediate appeal. Her method appeared to value the inductive creativity of the classic methodology, and also resonated with the current popularity of constructivism within social research. As an epistemological stance, constructivism asserts that reality is constructed by individuals as they assign meaning to the world around them (Appleton & King 2002). From a constructivist perspective, meaning does not lie dormant within objects waiting to be discovered, but is rather created as individuals interact with and interpret these objects (Crotty 1998). Constructivism thus challenges the belief that there is an objective truth that can be measured or captured through research enquiry (Crotty 1998). Charmaz (2003) has therefore proposed a version of grounded theory that: "assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and viewed, and aims toward an interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" (p. 250).

Taking this perspective on the nature of reality, Charmaz (2006) is naturally critical of the way in which classic grounded theorists purport to discover latent patterns of behaviour within the data. Instead, she suggests that data and analysis are created through an interactive process whereby the researcher and participant construct a shared reality. She suggests that, rather than look for one main concern, grounded theorists should seek to construct a "picture that draws from, reassembles, and renders subjects' lives" (Charmaz 2003, p. 270).

Ultimately, however, through careful and critical exploration of constructivist grounded theory, it is apparent that, in common with Glaser's (2002) criticisms of Strauss and Corbin, Charmaz has similarly 're-modelled' the original methodology. This notion of 're-modelling' methodologies poses an interesting dilemma for all researchers. While it is important that methodologies are open to development and improvement, it is important to be wary of the point at which a methodology has been changed so much that it has become something different altogether. Indeed, as Bryant (2009), another proponent of constructivist grounded theory, has recognised "how far can one go with altering or revising GTM [grounded theory method] basic tenets before one ceases to be doing GTM" (para. 18).

While some would suggest that there are multiple versions of grounded theory, each with a family resemblance, Glaser has contended that they differ sufficiently from the original methodology that they serve a different purpose (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Thus, this article does not contend that either version is superior, simply different. As such, the first author's decision to avoid constructivist grounded theory in favour of the classic methodology in her own research was based upon several points of difference: the 'interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings'; the co-construction of data; the notion of relativism; and the predetermined lens through which data are processed. These will now be dealt with in turn, demonstrating for the reader the ways in which these core facets of the constructivist methodology differ from classic grounded theory.

The interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings

A central tenet of constructivist grounded theory is to give voice to participants. Charmaz (2006) has encouraged grounded theorists to incorporate the multiple voices, views and visions of participants in rendering their lived experiences. In so doing, constructivist grounded theory has deviated significantly from the original intent of the classic methodology. To agree with Glaser (2002), the purpose of grounded theory is not to tell participants' stories, but rather to identify and explain conceptually an ongoing behaviour which seeks to resolve an important concern. Essentially, the 'findings' of a grounded theory study are not about people, but about the patterns of behaviour in which people engage. Indeed, the main concern conceptualised in the grounded theory may not have been voiced explicitly by participants, but instead abstracted from the data in which the concern was acted out all the time (Glaser 1998). The unit of analysis is not

the person themselves, but incidents in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, in criticising classic grounded theory for focussing on “analysis rather than the portrayal of subjects experience in its fullness”, Charmaz (2003, p.269) appears to be dismissing classic grounded theory for failing to do something that it does not purport to do. Classic grounded theory aims for a conceptual understanding of social behaviour, rather than the constructivist focus on interpretive understandings of participants’ meanings.

This is not to say that classic grounded theory is not concerned with participant perspectives. Indeed, Glaser (2002) has identified classic grounded theory as a perspective methodology. The key difference, however, is that participant perspectives are explored not from a descriptive or interpretive approach, but with an aim to raising these perspectives to a conceptual level (Glaser, 2002). Multiple perspectives are not denied, indeed, participants’ perspectives influence their behaviours. However, through constant comparison and the interchangeability of indices, classic grounded theory aims to conceptualise an ongoing pattern of behaviour that will account for as much variation in the data as possible. While on an empirical level participant perspectives will undoubtedly vary, the concepts themselves may not change. Through constant comparison, the latent behaviour is conceptualised, saturating concepts and transcending the descriptive level of multiple perspectives to account for as much variation in the data as possible. Classic grounded theory aims to identify a pattern of behaviour that transcends empirical difference in order to provide a conceptual, rather than descriptive or interpretive, rendering of participant behaviour.

The co-construction of data

A further key principle in constructivist grounded theory is that data and analysis are co-constructed in the interaction between the viewer and the viewed, the researcher and the participant (Charmaz, 2003, 2006). Charmaz (2006) offers this as an alternative view to classic grounded theory, which she criticises for retaining a ‘distant’ relationship with participants, whereby researchers “assume the role of authoritative experts who bring an objective view to the research” (p. 132). In response to this claim, it is argued here that the contribution of the researcher in shaping data and analysis within classic grounded theory is certainly not ignored. Glaser (2002) has asserted that

researcher bias... is just another variable and a social product. If the researcher is exerting bias, then this is a part of the research, in which bias is a vital variable to weave into the constant comparative analysis (para. 12).

Thus, classic grounded theory does not necessarily assume the naive objectivity of the researcher, but rather through the rigorous application of the methodology, researcher biases are revealed and accounted for (Glaser 1998). The researcher’s perspectives are not ignored, but are incorporated as simply more data to be constantly compared. Glaser (1998) has recommended that the researcher ‘interviews oneself’ and analyses this interview as any other, comparing it with other data, codes and emerging categories. By ‘interviewing oneself’, researcher biases become simply more data and any inappropriately presumed relevancies can be corrected for through constant comparison. As such, throughout her PhD study, the first author wrote several memos exploring her own perceptions, experiences and existing knowledge which were then constantly compared with other data. The researcher perspective is thus interwoven into the analysis as simply another perspective.

Moreover, as only one slice of the data, the researcher’s perspective is not privileged or considered different to the other multiple slices of data that inform theory development. Charmaz (2003) has been critical of the ‘objectivist’ stance within classic grounded theory, advocating instead for a mutual relationship between the researcher and participants resulting in the creation of a shared reality. Indeed, while classic

grounded theory does not ignore researcher perspective, researchers do strive for a degree of objectivity as fulfils their purpose; to generate a conceptual theory that is abstract of the descriptive detail from which it was derived. In contrast to Charmaz's (2003, 2006) assertions that this objectivist stance is an attempt at discovering truth, however, it is argued here that the objective positioning of the researcher is about privileging the participants' main concern rather than seeking objectivist accuracy and verification. Indeed, Glaser (2002) has warned against using the guise of constructivism to discount participants' concerns, accusing constructivist grounded theory of making "the researcher's interactive impact on the data more important than the participants" (p.4). Thus, maintaining a degree of objectivity in classic grounded theory is not necessarily about trying to find 'truth' in the data. Rather, by privileging participants' main concerns over the professional concerns of the researcher, this objective stance strives to generate a theory that is useful, meaningful and relevant to participants. In contrast to the above quotation from Charmaz (2006), while classic grounded theorists do strive for a degree of objectivity, they certainly cannot claim to be 'authoritative experts'. Instead, classic grounded theory can claim only to produce potentially useful hypotheses about participants' concerns and behaviours. A grounded theory is not an authoritative truth claim but a theory; it is not intended to be proven but to be used and modified (Glaser, 1992).

Relativism

Constructivist grounded theory assumes the relativism of multiple social realities (Charmaz, 2003; Charmaz, 2006). As a result, whereas classic grounded theory seeks to identify and conceptualise one main concern and its continual resolution, constructivist grounded theory presents a more diffuse theoretical product which does not centre upon a core category (Martin, 2006). This is intended to allow for the multiple truths perceived within constructivist research, and the emphasis on capturing multiple participant perspectives rather than looking for one main concern. In abandoning the search for a core category, however, constructivist grounded theory can again be considered to have deviated significantly from the original methodology. Indeed, for the classic grounded theorist, the emergence of a core category is an "indisputable requirement" (Holton, 2007, p. 280). It is the isolation of one main concern and the focus on one core category that enables the classic grounded theorist to present an integrated, parsimonious theoretical product.

It is pertinent to note that, by focusing on a main concern, the classic grounded theorist does not assert that this is the participants' only concern, but rather that it is one particular and significant concern with which participants are continually dealing. Where there is more than one concern competing for the researcher's attention, Glaser (1998) has recommended that, in the service of presenting an integrated, parsimonious and theoretically complete grounded theory, these can only be dealt with one at a time. Thus, the core category presented in the grounded theory does not necessarily account for all of the behaviour under investigation, but rather accounts for one particular behaviour that is highly relevant for participants in the substantive area (Glaser, 1998).

The relativist stance within constructivist grounded theory is presented by Charmaz (2006) as a revolt against 'objectivist' grounded theory, which seeks to develop a "provisionally true" and "verifiable" theory of reality (p. 273). While in classic grounded theory the notion of 'discovering' a latent pattern of behaviour does appear to reflect a positivist search for truth, in contrast to this criticism from Charmaz, classic grounded theory aims only to present plausible hypotheses about participants' behaviour. The focus is not on producing and verifying facts, findings or accurate results but in generating concepts that are variable and modifiable (Glaser, 2004). As such, it is acknowledged that concepts generated in classic grounded theory will indeed have different meanings to different people, but whatever the meaning, the concept will still

exist (Glaser, 2004). Through the interchangeability of indices achieved in theoretically saturating categories, the categories presented in the final theory are conceptual rather than descriptive, meaning that they can account for much variation in the data. The final theory is therefore presented as transient, open to modification as it is exposed to new data. It is this conceptual level that enables grounded theory categories to transfer to different situations; not on account of transferring descriptions from one unit to another but in the modifiability of concepts within different settings (Glaser, 2004).

Philosophical position

Glaser (2002) has criticised constructivist grounded theory for contradicting the openness of the original methodology by predetermining one particular lens through which to analyse data. Instead, classic grounded theory is presented as a general method, which can use any type of data and is not attached to any one theoretical perspective; it is essentially ontologically and epistemologically neutral. As such, Glaser (2005) has argued that discussions of ontology (what we believe about the world) and epistemology (how we can come to know what we know) are moot within classic grounded theory. Within social research, however, this position proves somewhat problematic, where there is an increasing expectation that researchers are explicit about their philosophical position (Grix, 2002). Glaser's assertions that classic grounded theory is epistemologically and ontologically neutral have therefore been attacked as non-committal, naive and as perpetuating an "epistemological fairytale" (Bryant, 2009, para.13). In response, Holton (2007) has provided a helpful clarification of Glaser's position:

this is not to say that classic grounded theory is free of any theoretical lens but rather that it should not be confined to any one lens; that as a general methodology, classic grounded theory can adopt any epistemological perspective appropriate to the data and the ontological stance of the researcher (p. 269).

While it is generally understood that substantive codes and categories emerge from the data – that is, they are not predetermined by a specific research question, extensive review of literature or rigid interview protocols – researchers have found it more difficult to grasp the notion of theoretical emergence (Holton, 2007). Rather than assuming a theoretical perspective in advance of the study, the classic grounded theorist stays open to theoretical codes from multiple theoretical perspectives with which to organise the emergent theory (Glaser, 2005). Thus, for example, the constructivist view is only one way of looking at the data. While a constructivist perspective may be highly appropriate for particular studies, it must emerge to have relevance rather than being predetermined at the outset. Thus, "where grounded theory takes on the mantle for the moment of prepositivist, positivist, postpositivist, postmodernism, naturalism, realism etc, will be dependent on its application to the type of data in a specific research" (Glaser, 2005, p. 145). In classic grounded theory, the theoretical perspective is thus specific to each study, unlike the constructivist version which pre-frames the lens through which data are processed.

While the classic grounded theory methodology is not defined by one particular theoretical perspective, the emergent theoretical product of a study will be situated within a particular perspective based on the emergence of appropriate theoretical codes. Typically, theoretical perspective is implicit within the presentation of classic grounded theory studies. Although there is increasing expectation within the qualitative domain that researchers are explicit about the philosophical position of their studies, within classic grounded theory, as a general inductive methodology that strives for abstract conceptualisation, this is not considered necessary (Holton, 2007). Within the current climate of social research, this philosophical position will undoubtedly continue to be subject to much debate. It is certainly a debate in which classic grounded theorists need

to be more involved. Amidst such debate, however, it is important to note that a preoccupation with the ontological and epistemological issues of grounded theory may distract from the simplicity of its purpose: to generate a theory from the data that fits, works and is relevant within the area from which it was derived. As such, Bryant (2009) has suggested that the epistemological differences between grounded theory versions may be reconciled if researchers focused less on the nature of the process, and more on the product:

the key issue becomes the extent to which their substantive research produces conceptual innovations and theoretical insights that prove useful ...the ultimate criterion for good research is that it makes a difference (para. 102).

This is indicative of a wider concern with the pragmatics, rather than the philosophy, of research. Although this is another area in which there is much debate, particularly surrounding the ontological compatibility of different perspectives, there is a rapidly growing interest in the use of mixed methodologies which seek to combine different philosophical positions as a means of best answering research questions (Duncan & Nicol, 2004). In light of this current progression towards a combinist approach in research, particularly in health, the potential for classic grounded theory to assume any theoretical perspective may soon be more willingly embraced. In attempting to address the real concerns of participants, using whatever perspectives and methods will best address the purposes of the research, classic grounded theory is perhaps more aligned with the direction in which modern healthcare research is travelling; seeing philosophical positions not as discrete, incompatible opposites, but as offering multiple and complementary approaches to understanding social phenomena.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it can be concluded that constructivist grounded theory is distinctly different to the classic methodology. Where constructivist grounded theory attempts to interpret how participants construct their realities and present multiple perspectives, it has remodelled the original purpose of classic grounded theory, which is to conceptualise a latent pattern of behaviour. Similarly, the relativism inherent within constructivist grounded theory and the predetermined philosophical lens are fundamentally at odds with the general inductive nature of the classic approach. It is hoped that this article has been able to clarify some key differences in both 'versions' of grounded theory, thus facilitating for the reader a greater understanding of the incompatibilities between the two. Given these fundamental differences, it is essential that researchers are clear and consistent in their choice of methodology, following one path rather than engaging in a methodological pick and mix.

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